



# Teaching Students With Disabilities About Online Safety

## Center for Technology Implementation

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### Overview

Students today spend a lot of time online and it is critical that they receive lessons in online safety and appropriate online behavior. These lessons are even more critical for students with disabilities, who may be particularly at risk online.

Many parents and teachers of children with disabilities are well aware of the potential for in-class bullying and are able to take steps to stop bullying before it starts, but what about the exclusion and harassment that teachers and parents don't see? As young people spend an increasing amount of time online, much of the inappropriate behavior, language, and material they encounter is beyond the immediate view of parents, teachers, and guardians. As such, it is important to prepare all students for safe interactions online, and it is all the more critical to examine the special risks and issues that students with disabilities face online. Using these tips and strategies, you can help your students meet the [standards for digital citizenship](#) and guide them to use technology and digital media in a safe and responsible way.

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### In Your Classroom

Many students with learning disabilities (LD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorders (ASD), and/or emotional or behavioral disorders struggle with social interactions and appropriate behavior. They may have difficulty reading social cues, regulating their behavior, determining the accuracy of information, or judging if someone is trustworthy. These social challenges mean that they may be at a higher risk for bullying, harassment, and victimization when interacting with peers and adults online.

Any student may inadvertently develop a relationship online with someone who seems friendly—someone who takes an interest in his or her life and asks superficially harmless questions about his or her home, school, or friends. However, a tween or teen with learning or other cognitive disabilities may not recognize that this seemingly friendly adult is asking inappropriate questions or that certain types of information may be dangerous to share with a stranger (e.g., phone number, school, real name).

This is not to say that students with disabilities should not go online, or that there is nothing of value online for students. In fact, research has suggested that the opposite is true. However, the challenges that students with LD face on the Internet mean that it is important to be aware of their online activities and talk with them openly and directly about what they may encounter. These conversations are essential for any student but they are particularly important for students with disabilities.

## Tips for Teaching Online Safety

- ▶ Discuss what is safe and unsafe to share online. Teach all students about the information that should not be shared online, including their real name, school, phone number, address, picture, or other identifying information. Make a “Do Not Share” list and post it in your classroom as a reminder.
- ▶ Help your students understand that what they post online is not private, even if they think that only their friends can see it.
- ▶ Incorporate discussions of meaning in writing into your conversations about online behavior.
- ▶ Statements that are meant to be funny or sarcastic can easily be misinterpreted online. This is a great opportunity to talk about formal versus informal language, and about how writing for different audiences and purposes can change what you say (i.e., the use of emoticons or the “sarcasm tag”).
- ▶ Teach responsible online citizenship and help your students recognize and avoid malicious online behavior. Model appropriate and inappropriate interactions, and teach students ways to escape and report cyber-bullying. A number of great resources are available to help students model different situations online.

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## What the Research Says

Although some research has shown that young people with disabilities are at greater risk of being victims of bullying and harassment, there is little research about how these risks extend to online behavior (Holmes & O’Laughlin, 2014). However, a study by Kowalski and Fidena (2011) suggests that many of the same issues exist both online and offline.

Social interactions are complex. For example, the social skills needed for basic conversations differ from those needed to resolve conflicts and determine appropriate behavior in social situations. Basic social skills include maintaining eye contact, understanding facial expressions, and recognizing appropriate personal space (Canney & Byrne, 2006; Waltz, 1999). Participating in more complex social situations, however, requires interaction skills (resolving conflicts, taking turns, interacting with authority figures), affective skills (identifying feelings, understanding the feelings of others, recognizing whether someone is to be trusted), and cognitive social skills (making choices, self-monitoring, understanding community norms).

These skills are essential in face-to-face communication, but they are also essential for ensuring healthy and safe online interactions. This places children who have difficulties with complex social skills at a potentially higher risk for dangers online. For example, a student who finds it challenging to make appropriate choices or recognize whether strangers are trustworthy may more easily become a victim of an online sexual predator, an e-mail phishing scheme, or cyber-bullying. Students with disabilities may be especially vulnerable to the harmful advances of online users who show a seemingly benign interest in their lives because they are more prone to loneliness (Margalit & Al-Yagon, 2002), and because they may struggle to properly interpret the intentions of others on social media (Holmes & O’Laughlin, 2014).

The MacArthur Foundation's recent study of teens' online behavior indicates that online activity helps teens learn important social and technical skills, develop and extend friendships, and explore new and familiar educational topics (Ito et al., 2008). The anonymity that may present challenges for students who struggle with social skills can also give them the opportunity to practice interactions with others in a "safe" environment, the freedom to explore different aspects of their identities, and the confidence to request help with less fear of rejection (Raskind, Margalit, & Higgins, 2006). Although safer social networking environments such as Sunshine Friends ([www.specialfriends.com](http://www.specialfriends.com)) are available for individuals with disabilities, some prefer to interact with a broader group of people (Holmes & O'Laughlin, 2014).

A recent study on teens' use of social networking sites found that more than half of the adolescents' social networking pages researchers reviewed displayed private content and information about risky behavior, including sexual activity, drug use, and violence (Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center of Seattle, 2009). Encouragingly, when a physician in the study sent teens messages through MySpace warning them about the private content they were posting online, many teens either removed the information or set their profile to private (allowing only friends to see the information). As this example demonstrates, an explicit conversation with a trusted authority figure (such as a parent, a teacher, a family friend, or the student's doctor) is often enough to help students think more carefully about the personal information they make available online.

A study by Kowalski and Fedina (2011) found that parents were often unaware of their children's online activity and how often they were victims of cyberbullying. Accordino and Accordino (2011) found that students with a close parental relationship were bullied less often. This underscores the importance of being aware of students' online behavior.

Although threats to students' safety may make it tempting to ban Internet use entirely, experts agree that educating children about the risks and responsibilities associated with online communities is the best way to keep them safe. Completely blocking access or using scare tactics will not work (Ash, 2009). Instead, it is important to stay involved in students' lives and help them develop the skills they need to safely reap the benefits of the online world.

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